

PENANCE ¹

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FOR the young officer, the weeks dragged intolerably. He loathed war, its dusty marches, its rough camps, its horrible sights, its lacerating wounds. He was fond of study and travel, but for four years he had scarcely opened a book and he had traveled only in the saddle from battle-ground to battle-ground.

Though he loathed war, hated its waste, its cruelty, Buckingham was a brave soldier. His ancestors had been officers in the Revolutionary Army and there had been ever since military men in his family. He had enlisted with a light heart, certain that the struggle would be short, since the balance of courage and experience in arms was so heavily weighted on his side. Though he had been a student of law and not of tactics, he had risen rapidly to his important command. Gossip declared him the handsomest officer in the army; young women in cities were forever pouting because he was forever in distant camps. It was expected that at the end of the war he would be given his choice of important official positions.

But the war did not end: it dragged on and on. Buckingham grew frantic with impatience: he plunged at last into despair. His youth was going — a common conviction at twenty-six — he was accomplishing nothing. His cause, he saw more and more clearly each day, was destined to be a lost cause. He had laid out for himself an orderly life in which there should be ample leisure

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and opportunity for the cultivation of the mind and for the upbuilding of a home. Now he was to have nothing, nothing. With clear eyes he foresaw the long future of poverty and homelessness. All the possessions of the family, even the last of his mother's trinkets, had gone into the bottomless treasury of the Great Cause and his house had been laid in ashes. He contrasted his present lot, commander of a division though he was, with the lot that would have been his in time of peace. He would have been prosperous and happy, he would have been married to some gentle and lovely creature, he might have had a son. Instead, he lived in a tent, his ears were filled with groans and screams and with hoarse shouts of command, his nostrils with the smell of powder and the smoke of reducing fires.

Steadily, all one midsummer day, Buckingham led his division in a march of dire necessity. Thirty miles ahead the army was even now engaged in battle, and the need of reinforcements was imperative, so imperative that Buckingham did not dare to lead his men too rapidly for fear that exhaustion would unfit them for duty when they arrived. The division was a heart-breaking sight; thin, ragged, shoeless, they went on grimly, even making light of their situation. A sense of humor and a measure of hope were still with them.

All day the sun beat upon them. Houses and wells were few, streams far apart; when they came to a creek, they drank greedily, without regard for possible infection. They said jokingly that those who had survived until now would survive forever. Frequently a soldier halted to toss away the last fragment of shoe sole which impeded his progress or to tighten the bandage which made walking possible.

In the late afternoon they halted for the rest which they should have had at noon. When the sound of the marching feet of men and horses and the rumble of wagons ceased, they heard a dim, ominous roar, and made comment.

"Hear that!"

"Cannonading!"

"Heavy, too!"

"We're too late to help in the slaughter."

A comrade turned a squinting eye upon the speaker.

"To be slaughtered, you mean! But there's a to-morrow."

Lying about the ground the men devoured the scanty rations in their knapsacks. Then in the hot sunshine they fell asleep in many ridiculous postures. They had learned to sleep sitting and standing and even on the march.

Presently with the padding of weary feet, which, multiplied a thousand times, acquired a strange, rustling quality, with hoarse commands, with rumble of wagon wheels, the division started its march once more toward those ominous sounds. Suddenly mounting an eminence, those in the front ranks beheld a low and distant ridge over which the smoke hung heavily. The cannonading had ceased, there was now only a faint crack, crack of musketry.

"They're chasin' 'em!" cried an exultant voice.

Presently came a galloping courier to the head of the long line. His dispatches announced that the fight was for the time over, the enemy routed. The Second Division was to go into camp, its leader was to report to his commanding officer.

Buckingham put spurs to his horse and went forward, followed by his aide, a slender, eager boy. All day, in a mood of great depression, Buckingham had ridden without a word for his young companion. He had spent a summer in Italy and his happiness there returned often to mock him. He remembered the softness of the sky, the grateful shade, the splendor and the mellowness of life. All this day Italy had possessed him. He chided himself sharply now for his preoccupation. In no smallest military duty had Buckingham ever failed.

It was dark when he reached the distant ridge and

went into council of war with his peers. The enemy had been driven back but had not been defeated. Across on the other ridge the camp-fires gleamed; back of the ridge, it was known, the enemy was gathering in force, as singers gather behind a curtain which is to rise at an appointed time. On both sides, sinister preparations were in the making and in each camp was certainty that the morrow would find the enemy startled at the strength of his foe. In reality the odds were equal, the opposing armies could offer almost man for man, wooded vantage ground for wooded vantage ground, open field for open field.

The plans for the morning were made before young Buckingham arrived. To him, young, brave, hope inspiring, the most daring and brilliant duty was assigned, the making of the opening charge of battle. His exhausted troops were to lie where they had camped till morning, then, as soon as they had had the minimum of rest necessary to revive them, they were to advance, form under the protection of the cannon on the ridge and storm the opposite hill. The older officers had weighed young Buckingham before he arrived: they measured him now once more with keen, cold eyes. Some coveted his task. But he was the youngest, he had the freshest troops — a fact which no one who had not seen the troops of Dare and Lenken could have believed possible. The task required fire, dash, enthusiasm, all of which Buckingham possessed.

When the council closed, Buckingham rode back to the distant woodland. The night was still, there was not sufficient air to stir a blade of grass. The quiet breathed presage of unendurable heat for the morning. Young Buckingham saw to-morrow's events as in a picture, himself leading the weary men, the weary men performing prodigies. His mind did not consider the result of the charge: it might succeed or it might fail, he would in two weeks or two months or two years be repeating the whole weary business. He never thought of death for himself.

Death was an impossible and an indifferent contingency. He might as well die as live the life which promised.

Then, unexpectedly, as he rode along in the moonlight with young Arnold, Buckingham felt a breath of cool, damp, pleasant air upon his cheek. They were nearing the woodland, and were in a moment in camp. There the sentries paced about. Otherwise all was still. The thought of the slumber of so many weary men was pleasant to Buckingham; his dull patience changed to a more positive emotion, a longing for the feel of the ground under his body, the stretching of saddle-cramped limbs, a heart-breaking desire for sleep. Thank Heaven there was in war this respite!

The sentry directed him to a little side road upon which headquarters had been established. The road dropped suddenly; a loosened pebble seemed to bounce downward for a long space; there was the blessed sound of dripping water, the smell of fresh sawdust and wet earth. On one side of the road in an open space stood an old mill with sagging, picturesque roof; on the other a house in which there were dim lights. Nearby on a little plot of grass a sentry challenged. There was a bed in the house, he said, for Buckingham.

Dizzily Buckingham dismounted. The moon rose high above the open place: the heavenly odors seemed to thicken. A stout woman came to the door; to her skirt clung a little boy, sleepy, yet wide-eyed, as though he would not miss a moment of the strange, exciting experience in which Fate had involved the quiet mill. He impeded his mother's progress, so frightened was he in spite of his curiosity to see the great enemy.

"I guess you'll want to go right up-stairs." The stout woman spoke without welcome; it had clearly been made plain to her that submission was imperative. "Minnie will show you to your room."

Buckingham nodded. The place looked clean, and they would probably have good beds. He peered into the

shadowy hall, eagerly expectant of Minnie, whoever she might be.

Then, hearing a little laugh, Buckingham lifted his head. Minnie stood on the stairway and looked down at him, the light from the candle in her hand flickering over her. She had dark eyes and a broad white forehead and a white neck: that much Buckingham saw at a glance before she led the way up the steps. Into his mind came a hundred flashing thoughts. He was aware once more of the soft, damp stillness of the place, of the silver moonlight, of the dense shadows, of the dripping water. Here, now, was a new element of enchantment, a beautiful girl, who with a candle, lit him at midnight to his room. Buckingham's whole being seemed to leap. He had been a boy in school and then a soldier in the army; he felt suddenly an overmastering hunger for the soft and beautiful in life, hated more terribly than ever the arid desert which surrounded on all sides this rare moment.

When the girl looked back over her shoulder, Buckingham was following her. The shadow which had fallen on the face of the stout, middle-aged woman, as the candle was carried higher, hid a mocking expression.

The girl preceded Buckingham into the room which was to be his, and placed the candle on the high, old-fashioned bureau, and then turned to him with a smile, which, though it was innocent, revealed an appreciation of the hour, of their isolation, of their youth. For an instant they faced one another, two beautiful creatures, meeting thus strangely. Buckingham breathed deeply, his flesh tingling. The girl wished him good-night and went out the door. When she had gone Buckingham stood still, listening. He heard her take a few steps, open a door, close it, and then everything was still.

Buckingham undressed slowly and stretched himself out upon the bed. The mattress was filled with feathers which rose about him not uncomfortably in this cool, damp place. For four years he had slept on the ground or on a hard cot; this bed received him like a cradle.

But he could not sleep: his ear strained to catch every sound. Once, it seemed to him, he heard a light step as the girl went about her room. Afterward the silence was unbroken: the glade lay as though it had been put under a spell. But the young general did not sleep. With hands grasping the twisted rails which formed the head-board of his old-fashioned bed, he lay motionless, wide-eyed.

When daylight broke, Buckingham's aide knocked at the door. Arnold was young: war had apparently not yet sickened him: he adored his master.

"It is five o'clock, sir. The woman is to give us chicken for breakfast. What can I do for you, sir?"

Again Buckingham felt his heart leap. It was morning: he would see the girl once more. He made his toilet with care and came down the steps, his spurs clanking, himself resplendent. His last thought before he fell asleep had been one of shame. What he had seen had been only the pretty face of a miller's daughter who was not in the least akin to the mate whom he had dreamed of since his boyhood. But the full light of morning banished shame. He said to himself that he must see the girl again if only to satisfy himself that she was as beautiful as she had seemed.

The division made ready for the march and Buckingham waited in the parlor for his breakfast. Motionless, white-lipped, he watched for the opening of the door. Something within him had broken, some tight-drawn string had snapped. Theologians tell us that the Prince of Darkness waits outside each breast — how now must he have rejoiced to see entrance made so easy!

As Buckingham expected, Minnie brought him his breakfast. The longer she delayed the more certain was he that she would come. His mind dwelt upon her wide, dark gaze, upon her smile.

Finally the door opened and she entered and began to place breakfast before him. The window looked out into the green branches: the two were alone, secure. Buck-

ingham looked at his companion from the crown of her head to the hem of her skirt to discover whether last night's shadows had hidden any defects which this morning's sunshine revealed. But her eyes were as dark as he remembered them, her mouth as curving, her neck as white. The small portion which she brought him did not satisfy his hunger, and she went for more. But when she returned, Buckingham did not eat. The two seemed to feast upon the sight of one another, as two who have been separated in long and sorrowful absence. The stir without grew louder, the sunlight broadened on the floor. At a sound of a loud colloquy outside the door, Buckingham frowned and started to rise, whereupon the girl put out her hand and touched his sword.

"Oh," cried she, sharply, "What a cruel, cruel thing!"

Buckingham caught the hand and held it. Hitherto he had kissed no one but his mother; now he laid his cheek against the smooth neck of the miller's daughter.

Still the path of sunlight broadened on the floor. Still the sounds from without grew more and more imperative. Still the young general and the girl sat side by side in the little parlor. On the window-pane a bee droned. The minutes passed and passed, seeming at once like seconds and like hours. A half hour passed and the door burst open.

"I have knocked, sir!" cried young Arnold, his face turned toward the hall. "It is late, sir!"

The young general rose heavily from the old settle. Without shame the girl held to his arm.

"Oh, do not go! Do not go!"

Buckingham made no answer. Desire had been whetted, not assuaged. He turned to her for an instant as though he would sit down once more. Then he saw, through the haze which surrounded him, young Arnold's face, haggard and amazed, and went out to take command of his division.

The Second Division had made forced marches in its four years of service; it was famous, indeed, for moving

from place to place with the speed and secrecy of Pallas Athena. It moved now with a speed which was madness for men who were shortly to charge a wooded hill. Young Buckingham galloped, drew in his horse, galloped again. With him his aide kept pace, the sudden changes of gait jolting him almost from his saddle. Once, Buckingham, turning to glance at him, saw that tears were running down his cheeks.

"My God, Arnold!" cried he. "Are you afraid?"

"No, sir," answered young Arnold. "I am not afraid."

The road was long which led from the mill to the ridge where the main army lay and where officers strained eager eyes through glasses forward toward the foe and backward toward Buckingham. Couriers had been dispatched; they rode furiously. One met the Second Division before it left the woodland, one met it midway, another near the ridge. The burden of all the messages was the dire necessity for haste. With a crazier gait, with a whiter face, the leader of the Second Division hastened. He was magnificent upon his tall horse.

Surmounting the ridge, the Second Division formed for the charge, plunged down into the valley and up toward the heights. But the foe had gained valuable time. Reinforcements had arrived,—were in place. As one wrestler deftly sends another hurtling backward, so those entrenched sent Buckingham's division backward into the little valley which became for hundreds a valley of horrible death. Rout was absolute; it set the example for the day's defeat; it marked the beginning of the end of war, the downfall of a kingdom, the final loss of the Great Cause.

Buckingham himself was not wounded, he seemed to live a charmed life. He plunged into danger, he stood defiantly before murderous shot, he carried to a place of safety the body of young Arnold, between whom and himself there was, as history records, a peculiar devotion. For the rest of the day he had only to await the outcome

of other engagements on the field. He had free moments when he could think of the old mill and of his madness.

On the retreat that night, he dismounted and walked with bent head among his men who were too racked with weariness to know who walked with them. They did not know why they had been late in starting from the mill. They did not know that they were expected to be earlier. They knew only that once more they had been led to slaughter and that fewer than usual had escaped. If they thought of Buckingham, they pitied him and said to each other that luck was against him.

The night was dark and a fierce storm beat upon them. At daylight a courier summoned Buckingham to a council by the roadside, where his fellow officers looked at him in astonishment. Youth was gone; his face was contorted; pain had fixed her seat in his dark eyes.

If he expected reproof, he received none. He was not even asked for an explanation: it was assumed, then and later, that he had done the best that he could do. He heard in silence the directions for the march. Then he returned in silence to the fragment of his command. His hand rested on the handle of his pistol. When pain became intolerable, there was a gate open.

After the war was over, Buckingham settled near the ruins of the house where he had been born. His overseer's cottage of ante-bellum days was still standing; in it he took refuge and set about earning his bread. His simple neighbors were glad to find work and a master once more. Gradually his hand loosened its clasp on his pistol. He came to look upon life as a penance; if he voluntarily yielded it up, he would be committing one more sin.

Gradually the old place took on something of the appearance of former days. The fields were brought back to cultivation; good crops were gathered; Buckingham prospered. What became of his earnings no one knew. He did not rebuild the old house, but lived in his cottage; he never gratified his desire for travel, but labored from sunrise to sunset. What he could do for the maimed and

helpless of his men and for their widows and orphaned children he did, but these charities which absorbed his income remained a mystery even to the recipients.

There was another penance which Buckingham set himself. He never went back to find the old mill or the girl for whom he had sold himself. Nature which had then so cruelly betrayed him, played upon him another cruel trick; she kept before his eyes the girl's eyes and her curving lips and her soft neck. When he saw candlelight playing on a white wall, he thought of her; when he heard a bee droning in the sunlight, he suffered almost unbearable heartache. Sometimes he thought of the girl's suffering with pain which was harder to bear than his grief. Then, when still a young man, he shed tears. Sometimes he meditated upon the injustice of Fate which could in a half hour nullify the training of a man's life and send him away undone.

After thirty years, Buckingham returned to the battlefield, requested by the national government to aid in establishing the exact line of his charge. It was a request which Buckingham could not well refuse. Having concluded his business with the gentlemen of the commission, he accepted the services of a guide and drove about the battlefield. He knew pretty well what he should hear. History had written an account of him of which the bravest men might be glad. That there lived in the world after young Arnold died another man who knew the truth, Buckingham did not surmise.

The guide was loquacious. General Buckingham, whom he did not know, was his only passenger; to him he related glibly his store of incidents. He had been, he said, a lad at his father's mill, round which the Second Division had encamped.

"I remember well seeing the General come in," said he. "It was at night, and he was very tall, as tall as you, sir, and the handsomest man I ever saw. I was told to go to bed but I stayed up to see him. When he came, I was frightened and hid behind my mother."

"You hid behind your mother," repeated General Buckingham in a toneless voice. He turned his head slowly to look toward the far West where lay the woodland and the mill. He had thought that he was old, cured of his madness, but though youth was gone, he was still possessed. If he could only have returned with honor!

"You hid behind your mother!" said he again.

"Yes," chuckled the guide. "I was dreadfully afraid. And something very strange happened." The guide turned in his seat so that he could address his passenger more comfortably. "History says nothing of it, but I know it. We all knew the battle was raging and the soldiers would have to leave early. There was a cousin staying with us and she and Mother made out they would delay the march by giving the general a good breakfast and giving it slowly. Minnie said she was going to keep him longer than that. Both of them were hot against the enemy. And Minnie did keep him. Mother knew when it was time for them to start, and it was long after when they did start. I always claim that if Buckingham had been earlier, the fight would have ended different. Mother could prove that he did n't start on time if she was living, and so could Minnie. Minnie told Mother what the General had said and they laughed and laughed."

When General Buckingham reached the site of his disastrous charge, he dismissed the guide and stood alone on the wooded crest which he had striven too late to reach. A great marker, describing the catastrophe in colorless military terms had been erected on the summit; he read it through bravely. He remembered the face of young Arnold who had so loved him, he saw horrible wounds, he contemplated finally with clear eyes the sordidness of the incident which had betrayed himself and his friends. Then suddenly he lifted his head and laid his hands across his breast.

"Now," said he thickly. "I am free. I have done penance enough."